# A Preliminary Study of Speech Level Shift Ability in Self-Taught Certified Basic-Intermediate Japanese Learners

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**Abstract.** Foreign Japanese learners from non-honorific language countries need more ability to perform speech level shifts. Therefore, this preliminary study aims to analyze the ability to perform speech level shift in self-taught certified Japanese language proficiency basic-intermediate learners. In order to collect and analyze data, this study conducted a qualitative method with an observational approach. The participants of this study were an Indonesian graduate senior high school who mastered the Japanese Language Proficiency Test N3 level certificate through self-taught and a Japanese second-year graduate student as a native speaker. The results of this study show no relevance between certified language proficiency and speech level shift ability regarding the Japanese learner participant being a self-taught learner (through social media, several websites, and applications). Therefore, the results of this study suggest that the capability of speech level shift should be learned through the language learning process in a formal classroom.

**Keywords:** *Speech level shift, self-taught Japanese learners, Japanese language proficiency test level N3*

## 1 Introduction

Known for the complicated honorific language, Japanese language differentiate its linguistic form by the degree of formality or politeness, called speech level in utterances according to [1]. The social factors and situational context determine the choice of use at the speech level., which is related to [2], [3], [4]. [5] states, the speaker must choose the appropriate speech level to be considered polite in society or group. This study adapted the scale of speech level theory by [6] by indicating the sentence-final form of *masu* form and plain form, namely the formal and informal forms here. (table 1).

**Table 1.** The sentence final in formal form and informal form.

| Clause Type | Formal Form | Informal Form |
|---|---|---|
| Verbal | Verb+*masu* (present) | Verb+*(r)u* (present) |
| | Verb+*masen* (negative) | Verb+*nai* (negative) |
| | Verb+*mashita* (past) | Verb+*ta* (past) |
| | Verb+*mashite* (gerund) | Verb+*te* (gerund) |
| Adjectival (い) | Adj+copula | |
| | *desu* (present) | *-i* (present) |
| | *deshita* (past) | *-katta* (past) |
| | | *-kute* (gerund) |
| Nominal Adjectival (な) | Nom/Adj+copula | |
| | *desu* (present) | *-da* (present) |
| | *deshita* (past) | *-datta* (past) |
| | *deshita* (gerund) | *-de* (gerund) |

Unless social aspects like age difference, social status and formality vary during the conversation, the utilization of speech level usually remains consistent. However, previous studies by [7], [8], and [6], prove that the mixture of speech level usages could occur within a single speech context wherein the social factors stay unchanged because the speaker is an active agents who strategically choose to use honorific or non-honorific form to achieve their interactional goals according to [6], [9] recent study. This phenomenon is also known as 'style shift' or 'speech level shift,' whereas the term speech level shift is used in this study.

Despite the remaining social factors, [7] examined the occurrence of speech level shift in Japanese talk shows and interviews indicated by the relationship's intimacy rather than politeness or formality. Ikuta indicated that the shift from casual to desu/masu form occurs when the speaker asks very personal questions, and the shift from desu/masu to casual form occurs when the speaker shows empathy toward the listener or signals structural changes in a conversation. A similar opinion is also stated by [8]. In contrast, the formal style is used to show politeness due to the non-intimate relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. Meanwhile, the informal style is used to create a casual atmosphere, show friendliness, exclamatory expressions, and internal monologue. [8] also affirms that speakers shift back and forth between formal and informal forms to adjust the degree of formality and politeness. Based on these findings, it could be assumed that speech level shift can be indicated not only by the social factors that might influence it but also by the degree of intimacy and as a strategy to achieve the right degree of formality.

However, these previous studies only focused on the conversation between Japanese native speakers and still lack the point of view of foreign Japanese learners. It has already been increasing rapidly due to Japan's popular culture, such as *anime, manga,* drama, and J-pop in recent days. As foreign Japanese learners, especially those who do not have honorific language in their native countries, set aside shifting in speech level, using the appropriate speech level itself is already challenging enough. As [10] examines in her study about learners' awareness of speech level in Japanese, many learners realized how difficult it is to use appropriate speech level shifts in communication by interacting with native speakers. They need to be able to use

the informal form properly and shift to the formal form unintendedly due to the lack of practice and overloading.

In addition, [10] also examines that the learners tend to overgeneralize what they noticed; for instance, some of them noticed that elementary school students used informal form when they talked to their teachers, and they drew the conclusion that there is no stern rule in the usage of speech level which is not valid. [11] suggests that learning the range of co-occurring linguistic features that represent various speech levels and the social factors that determine it is required. [10] also, it is possible to teach speech-level usage in elementary-level Japanese language study through a formal classroom. Teaching formal form first is because it is socio-culturally safer and more straightforward. It also prevents learners with limited access to the language through a formal classroom or media resources from having a false conception of the actual Japanese language.

This phenomenon interested the writer in examining self-thaught Japanese learners who learn the language through informal classes such as media resources and are highly exposed to Japan's pop culture: *anime, manga,* drama, and J-pop. Therefore, this preliminary study aims to analyze the relevance of self-taught Japanese learners' language ability and the capability to perform speech-level shifts.

## 2 Method

This preliminary study conducted a qualitative research method, particularly an observational approach. The subject of this study was a graduated Indonesian senior high school student who learned Japanese at an intermediate-basic level through self-taught and mastered the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N3 Certificate as a foreign learner and a Japanese second-year graduate student as a native speaker. The subject was chosen because the learners mastered a basic-intermediate level of the Japanese language, which the writer assumes already aware of the existence of *Keigo* or formal form and informal form even through an informal language learning process. The data was taken synchronously in Zoom meetings and using a role-play card (table 2) to limit the content in the conversation and create a situation where the learners possibly shift from informal to formal form. The conversation was 16 minutes long and recorded and transcribed using the code JL for Japanese Learners and NS for Native Speaker to simplify the data analysis process.

**Table 2.** Roleplay Card

| JL | NS |
|---|---|
| You are the tutor for NS, who is a graduate student of a particular university in Japan and is going to Indonesia from October until December this year for an exchange program. You are expected to help and assist NS during the exchange period. | You will participate in an exchange program in Indonesia from October until December this year. JL is the first-year student who will be your tutor during the period. Ask JL about the hotel, accommodations, and lecture you will attend later. |

The collected data of formal and informal form utterances referred to [6]'s theory of speech level scale. They identified whether speech level shifted from formal to informal form, informal form to formal form, or back and forth between formal and informal form. The analyzed results

and data discussions that referred to several previous studies of speech level shift were then associated with [10]'s theory.

## 3 Results and Discussion

The data below show a conversation between an Indonesian undergraduate first-year student as the tutor (JL) and a Japanese graduate first-year student as an exchange student in Indonesia (NS). The conversation is also the first encounter for both of them.

### 3.1 Back and Fort Shift Between Formal and Informal Form

(1)      NS : えっと　私は 2023 年 10 月から 12 月 2 ヶ月インドネシアに留学します。

        *etto watashi wa nisen nijyuu san nen jyuu gatsu kara jyuu ni gatsu nikagetsu Indonesia ni ryuugaku shimasu.*

        Uh i will study abroad for two months from October to December this year on Indonesia.

      JL : ああ　2 ヶ月ね。

        *Aa nikagetsu <u>ne.</u>*

        Ah two months.

(3)      NS : ホテルを探したいです。

        *Hoteru wo sagashitai desu.*

        I want to find a hotel.

      JL : ああ　えっと　ホテルなら UAI の辺りにいろいろなホテルがあるけど

      えっと　詳しいは<u>あとです</u>。

        *Aa etto hoteru nara UAI no atari ni iroirona hoteru ga aru kedo etto kuwashii wa ato <u>desu</u>.*

        If it's hotel there is several kind of hotel near UAI i will tell you the details later.

The data above is a conversation of the first meeting between JL and NS which talks about the hotel for NS's residence during the student exchange program in Indonesia. Data (1) and (2) show a shift in speech level from formal to informal by JL. This is identified from the use of the copula desu at the end of the sentence in data (2) while in data (1) JL does not use the copula desu before the particle ne. Meanwhile, NS's level of speech remains constant using the formal form.

(4)      NS : あとで教えてくれますか。

        *Ato de oshiete kuremasuka.*

        You will tell me later?

JL : はい　あぁ　えっとホテルならちょっと<u>探してみるよ。</u>

*Hai aa etto hoteru nara chotto sagashite miru yo.*

Yes uh if it's hotel wait i'm trying to search for it.


NS : お願いします。

*Onegaishimasu.*

That would be helpful.

While data (3) shows JL shifts back to the informal form which is characterized by dictionary form verbs or verb + (r)u in accordance with the classification of sentence endings by [6] This shows the existence of unstable or multiple speech level shifts by JL in one conversational context. The use of informal forms in data (1) by JL, looks like an expression that expresses its own thoughts reflexively or almost like a monologue. This is in accordance with [12] opinion that the shift of speech level from formal to informal form occurs because JL is in a low awareness of NS as "thou" or her interlocutor in the conversation. Then the conversation continued with JL providing information about the hotel he found.

(4)　　　JL : ２ヶ月インドネシアに住みました　住んだら　えっと IBIS ホテルでも

<u>できるよ。</u>

*Ni ka getsu Indonesia ni sumimashita- Sundara etto IBIS hoteru de mo dekiru yo.*

You lived- if you live in Indonesia for two months you can also stay at IBIS hotel.

NS : IBIS ホテルって何ですか。

*IBIS hoterutte nan desuka.*

What is IBIS hotel?

(5)　　　JL : IBIS ホテルはえっと。

*IBIS hoteru wa etto.*

IBIS hotel is uh

NS : 普通のホテルですか。

*Futsuu no hoteru desuka.*

Is it a normal hotel?

JL : えっと IBIS ホテルは　住むためにのホテル<u>です。</u>

*Etto IBIS hoteru wa sumu tameni no hoteru desu.*

Uh IBIS hotel is a hotel to live in.

(6)　　　NS : わあ　なるほど　アパートみたいなホテルですか。

　　　　　　　*Waa naruhodo apato mitaina hoteru desuka.*

　　　　　　　Woah I see, is it a hotel like apartment?

　　　JL : あ　はい　ちょっとアパートみたい。

　　　　　　　*A hai chotto apato mitai.*

　　　　　　　Ah yes a little bit like apartment.

The data above is still a conversation about hotels. This time JL provides information about the hotel recommendations she has been looking for. Data (4) and (5) show a shift in speech level from informal to formal, then back to informal in data (6). This is identified through the formal form in data (4) which is characterized by verb+(r)u before the particle yo. The informal form in data (5) is characterized by the copula desu at the end of the sentence. Meanwhile, data (6) looks like a co-construction that requires further research in relation to Japanese speech levels.

Like data (1-3), data (4-6) indicate the existence of unstable or multiple speech level shifts by JL where the shifts are done too often. Although the shifts have social meaning in accordance with [12], but the speech level shifts are caused by the speaker's low awareness of "thou" or the interlocutor. It is assumed that JL's lack of knowledge and awareness as a speaker, of the existence of speech levels that affect social meaning in Japanese.

This is also supported by further interviews conducted by the author to JL as the subject, that JL almost never engaged in active conversations with Japanese teak speakers. Moreover, JL's language acquisition process is self-taught, by utilizing sources from the Internet such as social media, websites, and applications. Therefore, the certificate of language proficiency possessed by self-taught Japanese learners at the basic-intermediate level does not have a relationship with the learners' ability to make speech level shifts.

## 4 Conclusion

This preliminary study identifies inconsistent or back-and-forth shift by certified intermediate-level self-taught Japanese learners in direct contact conversational situations with teak speakers, which is caused by the speaker's low level of awareness of "thou" or the interlocutor in the conversation. As Maynard (1991)[12] argues, the lower the speaker's awareness of "thou", the higher the tendency to use informal forms. This is also proven in the data analysis, that the tendency to use informal forms by learners, while teak speakers tend to use formal forms.

In addition, this preliminary study also concluded that the shifting of multiple levels of speech by the speaker is due to the lack of knowledge and awareness of the level of speech in Japanese. Therefore, [10], [11] argues about the process of Japanese language acquisition. However, further studies with larger samples are needed for the objectivity of this preliminary study. Furthermore, a comparative analysis with Japanese learners who acquired language proficiency through formal and informal classes should also be conducted to strengthen the alleged conclusions in this preliminary study.

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